

**Homily, St. Andrew's  
Lent 5C, March 13, 2016  
Philippians 3:4b-14**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

"I will take exactly who you are and make it available to more people." This is how a particular process of parish transformation was described to me by The Rt Rev Melissa Skelton, now bishop of the Diocese of New Westminster, but then priest of St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Seattle. Before being elected, Bishop Melissa had spent 8 years leading a transformation at St. Paul's. By the time I visited in January of 2011, the parish was full of people young and old, long-time Anglicans and newbies. The Sunday morning service was bursting with life in a formal, Anglo-Catholic style of worship. One of the things I remember most clearly from when we met was her description of how it all happened. She came from a low-church background so it was odd that a high, "smells and bells" urban church would choose her as their rector. They feared she would change everything, catapulting their high-church character to "modernize." But instead she told them: "I'm going to take exactly who you are and make it available to more people." It worked. And it changed everything - not by keeping everything the same but not by abandoning who they were, in their heart and soul, either.

One of the most basic and fundamental human needs is belonging. One of my professors of pastoral care named "belonging" as the thing that everyone wants. In recent years, researcher and author Brene Brown has spoken and written about the human need for connection, and discovered along the way that those living most whole-heartedly were those with a strong sense of connection through the risk of vulnerability. Connection is the key to making our community and our Anglican expression of Christian faith that we hold dear available to more people. The first step in connecting with others is in knowing and loving ourselves - who we are. Such depth of knowledge and love is about more than words on a page or a particular piece of music. Figuring out just what that "more" is develops our confidence in who we are, so that we can be open to new and different people and foster a sense of belonging and connection.

On Monday nights through Lent we have been learning about some of the controversies in the first few centuries of Christianity. Such study challenges our assumptions that how we believe and practice our Christian faith today has always been. The reality is that it took many people engaging in much prayer and debate over centuries before what we would call the basic tenants of our faith were even determined. As lines were gradually drawn between heresy and orthodoxy, what was gradually being worked out were the boundaries of belonging. Who does one need to be and what does one need to believe, to be part of the family of God? What are the requirements for belonging? Who is in and who is not? Shifts in how such questions are answered are the stuff of transformation... how do we take exactly who we are and make it available to more people?

The church in Philippi had a turbulent history and in Paul's letter to the Philippians he encourages the faithful in their struggle with 'opponents'. We don't know for certain who these 'opponents' were, but they may have seen Paul's gospel as "just one ingredient among many in a religious potpourri." (Roetzel, 114) Paul preaches against such ideas and the people who

promoted them. Immediately before the passage we hear today, Paul issues a strong warning against “the dogs” and “evil workers.” It is in the context of this rather harsh polemical language against his opponents that Paul writes the argument we hear today.

Paul begins by expressing his authority, his extensive “qualifications” for being part of the in-crowd: “If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.” Tick, tick, tick... Paul had it all and isn’t shy about demonstrating that he ticks all the boxes... he is everything required to be one of the cool kids. Paul was both Jew and Roman and as such a quintessential insider, he works feverishly, passionately and unrelentingly, to change the measuring stick... to change the requirements for membership... to change what it means to belong in the family of God. Paul seeks to express exactly who Christ is and make it available to all people: “Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ.” Paul takes the list of what it takes to belong - as a Jew or as a Roman citizen, tears it up and re-writes it: “I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.”

It is not the first time there has been such a major change in community boundaries for the people of God. Over about century or so following the end of the Babylonian exile, in the time known as the Restoration, the Israelite people transformed into the Jewish community. Keeping the Sabbath as the fulfillment of Torah, living by the Mosaic law, became the standard of belonging. No longer was family heritage or pedigree so important. Making a pilgrimage and sacrificing at the Jerusalem temple was still good, but gradually died out as a deciding factor about one’s faithfulness. Things change - the social world changes - and people of faith work hard to faithfully adapt their beliefs and practices for their contemporary circumstances. The question of how we take who we are and make it available to more people, to contemporary people, has always been one of some concern and no small amount of debate and prayer.

In the past several weeks, and for some months before that, we have been exploring new ways of worshiping, particularly with different music. One of the points of this kind of liturgical change is about making room for more people. Expanding our repertoire and exploring different ways of expressing our faith in worship can help create a connection for those who might have a harder time connecting to a more classical style. It can also help us become more flexible, and more aware of what we hold dear and what is window dressing. More even than that, how we worship is not only a personal experience of connection with God. Worship forms us for how we interact with the world and at its best, worship connects faith with life, prayer with work, and body with spirit. Exploring new ways of worshiping is about exploring new ways of connecting our spirit and soul with everyday, contemporary life and the people in it. It’s about knowing who we are beyond the externals so that we can be available to more people.

Among those who have long been alienated from the church are people who are gay, bisexual, lesbian, and transgendered. For decades in our society and in our church, we have had conversation and debate, prayer and study about the acceptance and inclusion of people who identify as GBLT. At this moment in time in our church, the conversation has become more acute. The House of Bishops of the Anglican Church of Canada recently had a special meeting about a proposed change to take out reference to gender in our Marriage Canon. They released a

statement about their lack of consensus a couple of weeks ago and just last night, our national governing body, the Council of General Synod, released a response. Here in the Diocese of Calgary, we have recently had conversations among clergy and among lay people about where we are at. For many, the main question is about whether the connection among us is strong enough to allow for different practices, such that parishes that feel called could offer rites of blessing to same-sex couples. There are some who believe strongly that the boundaries of our community need to expand to include just such diversity. There are others who disagree. Can our understanding and practice of what it means to be a follower of Christ in the Anglican way today expand, in real and concrete ways, to include people with differing views on human sexuality?

The question of how we take who we are and make it available to more people, to contemporary people, has always been one of some concern and no small amount of debate and prayer. It was for Paul, the earliest apostles and followers of Jesus' way, along with the communities they founded. Paul writes today about the loss of the tradition of his youth while also celebrating what he has gained: "For [the sake of Christ] I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ..." It sounds like Paul is completely rejecting his Jewish past, and yet in the context of his polemic against "the dogs" who seek to modify his gospel, he may well be simply using extreme language to emphasize his point. The focus, Paul insists, is not on the things of old but on Christ: the power of Christ's resurrection, shared through his suffering and death. The focus is on the hope and the glory of what lies ahead.

Paul's gospel is one of "already and not yet..." As Christians we know something of the power of Jesus' resurrection life and we share in Christ's suffering and death on the cross. We are already Christ's own... God has already chosen us as beloved children... and so we press on to make it our own... to live in light and hope and faith. We already know the love and joy of true life and we strive for the greater life that lies ahead. May we so embrace this Gospel of life for all that we allow God to expand and transform our community through our deepening connection in and through Christ. May we know who we are so profoundly that we become increasingly free to make ourselves, and the Gospel of Christ, available to more people.